TWO GENERATIONS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Nationalist Historical Thought in the Early Republic, 1776 - 1865

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On August 3, 1826, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Harvard divinity student, aged twenty-three years, removed his quill pen from an ink well and made the following entry in his private journal:

"Yesterday I attended the funeral solemnities in Faneuil Hall in honour of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The oration of Mr. Webster was worthy of his fame, and what is much more, was worthy of the august occasion. Never, I think, were the awful charms of person, manners and voice outdone. For though in the beginning unpromising, and in other parts imperfect, in what was truly grand he fully realized the boldest conception of eloquence."

Youthful Emerson's impression of Daniel Webster's eulogy for a pair of prodigious founding fathers who had died together only thirty days before reflects more than simply a sensitive student's appreciation for stylish oratory or a superficial sense of regret over the passing of great men. In the broader sense, here was subtle testimony to a significant facet of early nineteenth century thinking, evidence of Emerson's pride in those who contributed to the founding of the early republic and of his regard for Webster who seemed to Emerson to represent certain first principles of that beginning. This is an example, though an indirect one, of the nineteenth century tendency to characterize American revolutionary leaders as heroes who formulated a political ideology which seemed pivotal in United States history.

Many histories of the United States emphasize the trend of national development, seeking out and citing characteristics in American civilization which supposedly make Americans unique as a people. Not a few volumes have appeared using such progressive names as "The Growth of the American Republic," "The National Experience," "The American Nation," or "The History of a Free People." Every example of this sort seems to attempt to demonstrate a tacit pride in the synthesis of nationalism and democracy, themes frequently advertized as organizing principles in bulging texts for secondary and college level American history surveys. Even though the task of tracking down the origins of nationalism in American thought is a challenging and elusive undertaking, it is nevertheless a vital one because of the importance of nationalistic concepts to large numbers of American people who, if they are at all acquainted with their past, are frequently familiar with those persons and event which seem best to parallel their own patriotic sensibilities, namely Adams, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, the Civil War, and the Revolution.

The American Revolution in particular seems an obvious starting point for the nationalist view, for it was clear even to the revolutionaries themselves that the idea of the Revolution would affect the future far more than the dramatic sequences of events in which they were involved. It is what Americans think their Revolution meant which most penetrates historical consciousness of the present day and which governs reference to the archives of the past. Historians hoping to establish a relevant link between present and past have often used their impressions of conditions and trends in their own times to prepare lengthy and intensive excursions into their national past. Thus, it may be of special importance to discover how
some of the leading revolutionaries interpreted the Revolution and to ascertain how the following generation of literary and political leaders understood the intent of their predecessors. This way some of the central themes of early American nationalism, themes which persist in present day thinking and writing, may be detected and more fully comprehended.

The American Revolution was radical in the sense that it was unprecedented. Never before had a group of colonies separated themselves from their country of origin, nor had the "right of revolution," a devastating product of Enlightenment philosophy, been more dramatically exercised against such a powerful empire. The revolutionary leaders were by no means unaware of the newness in the phenomenon they were creating and were eager to recommend their achievement to future generations of Americans. In their comments about their roles in the struggle, they revealed distinct ideological and emotional attitudes, beliefs that the Revolution possessed identifiable qualities which would be absorbed into American national character. The most prominent of these was the conviction that the Revolution represented above all an intellectual transformation in the colonies, a new mental disposition which fostered the abandonment of previous ties to Great Britain. Growing out of this central theme was the notion that the break with England assumed the form of high drama, having epic proportions and being acted out by incomparable heroes. These qualities combined to give the revolutionary struggle an unmistakable missionary aura, creating an exalted opinion among patriot leaders that the cause they defended was one of international significance, offering everlasting lessons for all mankind.

More than thirty years after the end of the war, John Adams seemed
to possess remarkable insight into the meaning of what had transpired in America. He confessed to Thomas Jefferson that

As to the history of the revolution, my ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular. What do we mean by the revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and a consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington.

Intellectual historians have zealously seized onto the distinction Adams drew between revolutionary ideas and the war which was the outgrowth from them. But he was not alone among sophisticated men who speculated on the true quality of the national beginning.

Prominent Americans who wrote of their activities in the Revolution took pride that the undertaking had been completed with order and moderation, with an abiding restraint in creating a new government of republican form. As Jefferson boasted to British writer Richard Price in 1785, "the happiness of governments like ours, wherever the people are truly the mainspring, is that they are never to be dispaired of. When an evil becomes so glaring as to strike them generally, they arouse themselves, and it is redressed." Such was the degree of confidence in republican government held among early Americans, but no less secure was Jefferson's faith that in times of emergency appropriate representatives would be inserted into public office by the voting public. He attached to his previous statement the conviction that "he only is then the popular man and can get into office who shews [sic] the best dispositions to reform the evil. This truth was

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obvious on several occasions during the late war, and this character in our governments saved us. Calamity was our best physician."\(^4\)

Even Thomas Paine, radical as he was in two revolutions, praised the orderly manner of revolt and rebuilding in America. To him, America was to be honored as the first nation to give the world the example of written constitutions prepared by conventions of representatives elected expressly for the purpose of forming government. No less marvelous was the procedure for amending and thus improving the handiwork of the founding fathers. American political behavior was uniquely wonderful in that
government in other nations, vainly calling themselves civilized, has been established by bloodshed. Not a drop of blood has been shed in the United States in consequence of establishing constitutions and governments by her own peaceful system. The silent vote, or the simple yea or nay, is more powerful than the bayonet, and decides the strength of members without a blow.\(^5\)

John Adams seemed to put this line of thought in capsule form when he urged in 1818 that "revolutions are no trifles; that they ought never to be undertaken rashly; nor without deliberate consideration and sober reflection; nor without a solid, immutable, eternal foundation of justice and humanity; nor without a people possessed of intelligence, fortitude, and integrity."\(^6\)

Paine elaborated further on this peculiarly intellectual aspect of the Revolution in America and extended his interpretation to the French Revolution. Both political developments, in his view, represented a full

\(^4\)Ibid.


manifestation of Enlightenment liberation of Western consciousness from the narrow-minded pietism of an earlier day. In An Essay on Dream, a work published in Paris not long after Paine's departure for America in 1802, he suggested that nature, reason, and conscience had awakened mankind from the darkness of priestcraft and superstition and that had it not been for the American Revolution, which, by establishing the universal right of conscience, first opened the way to free discussion, and for the French Revolution that followed, this Religion of Dreams had continued to be preached, and that after it had ceased to be believed. Those who preached it and did not believe it, still believe the delusion necessary. They were not bold enough to be honest, nor honest enough to be bold.

Thus Paine's conviction that laws of nature had supplanted religious conformity indicates yet another aspect of the early meaning of the American Revolution, in addition to the faith in the republican form of government and the belief in peaceful nation-building.

These intellectual dispositions found in the minds of three crucial participants in the movement toward independence provide a limited framework for understanding some of the subtle changes the Revolution forced in the American character. But there is more solid proof of an overall political and psychological transformation in America. To find this one must understand the basis of controversy between patriots and loyalists during the revolutionary era, for one cannot perceive or fully appreciate the meaning of the patriot cause without sampling the human conflict between those colonists who preferred independence from the British Empire and those who wished Americans to remain British subjects. The loyalists, unlike Jefferson, distrusted the republican idea and, in contrast to Paine,

\[\text{Paine, Complete Writings, 2: 845.}\]
condemned the conception of natural law.

Most colonial Americans would have agreed with loyalist Joseph Galloway, a prominent political leader in Pennsylvania prior to the Revolution, that the relationship between colonies and mother empire was a reciprocal one, that in return for the protection of colonial rights provided by Britain, America should submit obediently to the laws of Parliament and Crown. Samuel Seabury, Anglican minister from New York, explained more specifically that

The right of colonists to exercise a legislative power, is no natural right. They derive it not from nature, but from the indulgence or grant of the parent state, whose subjects they were when the colony was settled, and by whose permission and assistance they made the settlement.

This mutual trust had supposedly been the foundation of contentment between Americans and British since the first settling of the new continent. But the patriot position maintained that Americans were betrayed, that colonial rights under English law were usurped by taxes and other restrictions. John Adams explained that patriots, like all Americans, "had certain habitual sentiments of allegiance and loyalty derived from their education; but believing allegiance and protection to be reciprocal."  

It is but an extension of this logic to say that once Great Britain violated its portion of the agreement, the colonies no longer bore the responsibility of allegiance.

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9Ibid., p. 9.
No patriot was better qualified to explain this intellectual quality of the Revolution than Benjamin Franklin, nor was any revolutionary more poignantly aware of the meaning of loyalism, as Franklin's own son, William, a former governor of New Jersey, stood unwilling to endorse the separation of the colonies from Great Britain. The Pennsylvania printer disliked the use of the term "loyalist," thinking that those who supported the Revolution had in effect remained consistent with the principles of English liberty. Americans who opposed independence would be more properly labeled "Royalists," in Franklin's opinion. "The true loyalists," he suggested, "were the people of America against whom they [those who opposed independence] acted."\(^{11}\) Revolutionaries were "loyal" in the sense that they resisted Great Britain "in favor of a British Constitution, which every Englishman might share in enjoying," while opposing "arbitrary impositions, that were contrary to common right and to their fundamental constitutions, and to constant ancient usage."\(^{12}\) Franklin's impressions seem to provide support for the viewpoint of Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn who holds an "old fashioned" belief that the Revolution "was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy."\(^{13}\)


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

Historian Claude H. Van Tyne was perceptive in assessing the critical distinction between patriots and loyalists. He observed that "loyalty was the normal condition, the state that had existed, and did exist; and it was the Whigs,—the Patriots, as they called themselves,—who must do the converting, the changing of men's opinions to suit a new order of things which the revolutionaries believed necessary for their own and their country's welfare."\(^{14}\) The decision to become an independent nation was thus a precarious step in the American way of thinking, one which Adams aptly described as a "great and important alteration in the religious, moral, political, and social character of the people of thirteen colonies, all distinct, unconnected, and independent of each other."\(^{15}\) The Massachusetts sage also noted that the means by which this phenomenon was pursued and accomplished was "surely interesting to humanity to investigate, and perpetuate to posterity."\(^{16}\)

Loyalists unquestionably suffered a variety of physical and spiritual hardships on account of their political allegiance with Great Britain. Thomas Hutchinson, former Governor of the Massachusetts colony and the most distinguished of loyalists, observed that "discerning men have concealed their sentiments, because under the present free government in America, no man may, by writing or speaking, contradict any part of this Declaration [the Declaration of Independence], without being deemed an enemy


\(^{15}\)Adams, The Works of John Adams, 10: 283.

\(^{16}\)Ibid.
to his country, and exposed to the rage and fury of the populace.\textsuperscript{17}

Loyalty oaths, Acts of Banishment, Committees of Correspondence and Committees of Inspection, along with the regular militias in various areas, were invoked by the patriots to keep their loyalist adversaries quiescent and powerless, thus preventing them from impairing the cause of the Revolution. Loyalist William Eddis of Maryland summarized the sense of frustration experienced by loyalists during the war when he pleaded "if I differ in opinion from the multitude, must I therefore be deprived of my character, and the confidence of my fellow-citizens, when in every station of life I discharge my duty with fidelity and honour?\textsuperscript{18}

How ironic it seems that a conservative American should thus beg for his individualism, for his privilege of free dissent, a privilege which exists in time of peace but usually not in periods of civil conflict! "DEATH," he cried, "the certain tax on all the sons of men, were preferable to so abject a state.---No---'twere better to suffer all that 'age, ach[e], penury, imprisonment, can lay on nature,' than resign that glorious inheritance of a free subject--the liberty of thinking--speaking--and acting, agreeable to the dictates of conscience!"\textsuperscript{19}

Here is an eighteenth century Hamlet who resolves to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune rather than support a course of political action, the patriot course, which

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Hutchinson, Strictures Upon the Declaration of the Congress at Philadelphia; in a Letter to a Noble Lord (microcard edition) (Louisville, Kentucky: Louisville Free Public Library, 1957), p. 32.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
his conscience will not permit him to accept. Neither could Eddis reconcile himself to the patriot definition of the public interest, the uncompromising agreement to the revolutionary cause. "I frankly acknowledge," he concludes, that "no man has a right to disturb the peace of the community, by breaching tenets destructive to the true interests and welfare of his country; but at the same time, it cannot be justifiable to compel others to adopt every system which we esteem conducive to the public good." Thus one loyalist declared his unwillingness to conform to the new patriot revolutionary ideology.

While patriot leaders agreed that for practical reasons loyalist sentiment in the colonies had to be suppressed, at least during the period of the war, some revolutionaries seemed to express genuine regret over the necessity to force fellow Americans into silence or exile. These pangs of regret signify a certain dignity of compassion, of humane understanding, a respectable attitude of magnanimity. Such is the ostensible spirit of a letter written in 1785 by Thomas Jefferson to Katherine Sprowle Douglass, relative of a Virginia loyalist who had been forced to assume exile and whose property had been confiscated by the revolutionaries. Jefferson reassured Mrs. Douglass that the property in question had not yet been sold and that, now that the war was finished, she might return safely to Virginia. "It is in the London newspapers only," Jefferson wrote, "that exist those mobs and riots which are fabricated to deter strangers from going to America. Your person will be sacredly safe, and free from insult."21

20 Ibid.

Always a protector of minority rights, the Virginia statesman affirmed that the "right to take the side which every man's conscience approves in a civil contest is too precious a right and too favourable to the preservation of liberty not to be protected by all its well informed friends." He noted that the Virginia assembly had observed this precious right of conscience in several of its laws pertaining to the loyalists, legislation which discriminated carefully between those who honorably took the side of the British and those who after siding with the empire strove to injure the patriot movement. Loyalists in the former category could be forgiven, but those who sought to damage the cause they opposed could never again fit in the new American milieu.

George Washington showed the same kind of sincerity in a response to a note written to him by Major John Joiner Ellis, an infantry officer in the British army. Ellis had written in praise of the General and was now requesting that Washington might not harbor ill feelings toward a former enemy. In reading the letter, the General remembered many friendships enjoyed prior to the Revolution, acquaintances which had been lost because of the necessity to choose sides in the war. Washington replied to Ellis that his letter "recalled to my remembrance some of the pleasing occurrences of my past life and reminded me of the Acquaintances I had formed in it; for whom, tho' separated by time, distance, and political sentiments I retain the same Friendship." Truly, Washington regretted losing

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
old friends, but he assured Ellis that while he was "opposed to the policy of G: B; and became an enemy to her measures," he had "always distinguished between a Cause and Individuals; and While the latter supported their opinions upon liberal and generous grounds, personally, I never could be an enemy to them." To Washington, as to Jefferson, the war was a public matter, not a private one.

Upon termination of the war, there of course remained the question of policy in each new state concerning former tories, whether to repeal old laws excluding them from political and economic power. Indeed, some colonial merchants opposed the legalization of dealing with former loyalists, apparently fearing their competition in commerce. In response to these apprehensions, John Adams in 1786 echoed the conciliatory tone of the two famous Virginians in his opinion that persecution of the loyalists should end. He recognized that the capital of former tories "will assist us in paying our debts, and in opening a trade every way." Then, transcending the issue of finance, Adams expressed his desire "to see my countrymen acting as if they felt their own great souls, with dignity, generosity, and spirit, not as if they were guided by little prejudices and passions, and partial private interests." Adams too wanted magnanimity to be the watchword in the civil affairs of the new republic.

The intellectual quality of the commentary of the highest leaders of the Revolution shows a genuine commitment to political principle which had

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25 Ibid.


27 Ibid.
been unjustly violated by British attempts to impose taxation laws, station troops in America, regulate colonial trade, and to deprive Americans generally of their "rights as Englishmen." An article of faith in recent writing on the Revolution is that no interpretation may be complete without a firm awareness of the radical impact of its intellectual content.

As Bernard Bailyn explains, the revolutionary leaders "groped for conceptions that could not exist within the received framework of political ideas. They drew on convictions that ran deeper than logic and mobilized sources of political and social wisdom." 28 The loyalists represented the intellectual old guard, their ideological outlook being the paradigm of the former status quo. Bailyn notes that "they could find only persistent irrationality in the arguments of the discontented and hence wrote off all of their efforts as politically pathological...they were outplayed, overtaken, by-passed." 29

John Adams, who seemed among revolutionary leaders to have the keenest comprehension of the American purpose, concluded in 1780 that the loyalists, many of whom fled from the rebellious colonies to seek refuge in England,

...never did know the character of the American people...the Americans at this day have higher notions of themselves than ever. They think they have gone through the greatest revolution that ever took place among men; that this revolution is as much for the benefit of the generality of mankind in Europe as for their own. 30


29 Ibid.

Then Adams drew what may have been a perfect summary of why independence from Britain was necessary: "The English manifestly think mankind and the world made for their use. Americans do not think so."  

Ever since the early settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century, Americans have been possessed of a sense of dramatic mission. Just as leaders of Puritan communities endeavored to establish a "New Canaan" on the American continent which would be a public display of a utopian spiritual society, the revolutionaries of the eighteenth century believed they were acting upon ideas of everlasting international significance. This consciousness of the epic proportions of the Revolution is explicitly shown in the words of Paine:

> The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom; but of a continent--of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seedtime of the continental union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender young oak; the wound would enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.  

Various revolutionary leaders heartily endorsed the writing of the history of the Revolution. Jefferson, for example, offered repeated encouragement particularly to American writers interested in preserving the memory of the event which had so recently transpired. Responding in 1785 to David Ramsay, who had recently composed his History of the Revolution in South Carolina, the Virginia sage noted his pleasure in seeing "a commencement

31 Ibid.

32 Paine, Complete Writings, 1: 17.
of those special histories of the late revolution which must be written first before a good general one can be expected."33 In 1790, female historian Mercy Otis Warren sent Jefferson a copy of her work on the American Revolution, which Jefferson received in cavalier fashion, writing to her that "a multiplicity of business has as yet permitted me to dip but a little into it; but yet sufficiently to foresee that it will soothe some of my moments of rest from drudgery and will add another illustrious name to the roll of female worthies, made for the ornament as well as the vindication of their sex."34 Yet it was to the French historian Hilliard d'Auberteuil that Jefferson seems to reveal his sense of the importance of guarding the memory of the Revolution. "The memory of the American Revolution will be immortal," he exclaimed, "and will immortalize those who record it."35 Although willing to admit that many crucial sources would be "hidden from the present age," Jefferson was convinced America, not Great Britain, "is the field where the greatest mass of important events were transacted, and where alone they can now be collected."36 He sensed that the Revolution was a peculiarly American phenomenon, an event which only Americans could fully understand. It was for this reason that Jefferson encouraged the French scholar to come to America to seek out "verification of the facts you mean to record," for "every man there [in America] can tell you more than any man here [in France] who has not been

34Ibid., 18: 77-78.
36Ibid.
there; and the very ground itself will give you new insight into some of the most interesting transactions."^{37}

John Adams was no less enthusiastic in his disposition that the achievement of American independence was an exceptional development. "The American Revolution was not a common event," Adams declared in 1818, "its effects and consequences have already been awful over a great part of the globe."^{38} With singular pride, he went on to boast of the miraculous quality of the unification of the thirteen colonies which had matured under constitutions of government so different, religious practices, social customs, manners and habits so distinct. Speaking of independence, Adams asserted that "the complete accomplishment of it, in so short a time by such simple means, was perhaps a singular example in the history of mankind. Thirteen clocks were made to strike together--a perfection of mechanism, which no artist had ever before effected."^{39}

There is little question that the Revolution had the effect of reinforcing American idealism, giving it renewed cogency and greater urgency. Yet it is particularly ironic that the new United States remained unsure of itself. The young nation, so unstable and inexperienced in affairs of the world, had embarked on a presumptuous course of providing ideological leadership for Europe, attempting like the early Puritans to construct a utopian example of government and society. Confidence in the possibility of giving such manifest guidance is demonstrated in the words of Washington.

^{37}Ibid.  
^{39}Ibid., 10: 283.
who wrote to Jefferson, in 1788, that the "rights of Mankind, the privileges of the people, and the true principles of liberty seem to have been more generally discussed and better understood throughout Europe since the American revolution than they were at any former period." 40

Perhaps it was Thomas Paine who best expressed the experimental nature of the Revolution along with the missionary intent. "The American Revolution began on untried ground," he wrote in 1804, then adding the observation that

> The representative system of government was then unknown in practice, and but little thought of in theory. The ideas that man must be governed by effigy and show, and that superstitious reverence was necessary to establish authority, had so benumbed the reasoning faculties of men that some bold exertion was necessary to shock them into reflection... 41

The experiment had begun, according to Paine, calling forth the powers of human reason to build a lasting government for free men, a government which could serve as an example of liberty under control for other other nations. "The practice of almost thirty years," Paine concluded, "has proved the excellence of the representative system, and the NEW WORLD is now the preceptor of the OLD. The children are become the fathers of their progenitors." 42

There were serious problems threatening obstruction of this American mission. Chief among them was the literary inferiority of the young and almost wholly agrarian republic in which the cultivation of literature

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41 Paine, Complete Writings, 2: 683.
42 Ibid.
was so frequently subordinated to the pursuit of some profession for a maintenance. Fearing a misrepresentation of America in the eyes of Europeans, David Ramsay demonstrated his concern to Jefferson that the commercialism of New England might prove harmful to the image of the Southern sector of the United States and of the nation in general. "Our country suffers in Europe for want of being known," Ramsay complained, thinking mainly, no doubt, of his native South Carolina and the surrounding states. But Americans in all sections appeared concerned that Europe might misunderstand the meaning of their new republic and this feeling of insecurity served to intensify efforts to assert the American identity.

Indeed, the first half of the nineteenth century was a restless era in the adolescent United States, as factories sprouted in the east and energetic pioneers moved gradually westward. It was a busy period for the arts as well, particularly in New England, the heart of the nationalist sentiment, where colleges churned forth young men of literary genius, including Irving, Bryant, Everett, Channing and, above all, Emerson. In fact it was Emerson who seemed to capture best the overall spirit of the age:

Alas for America, as I must so often say, the ungirt, the diffuse, the profuse, procumbent,—one wide ground juniper, out of which no cedar, no oak will rear up a mast to the clouds! It all runs to leaves, to suckers, to tendrils, to miscellany. The air is leaded with poppy, with imbecility, with dispersion and sloth.

Eager, solicitous, hungry, rabid, busy-bodied America attempting many things, vain, ambitious to feel thy own existence, and convince others of thy talent, by attempting and hastily accomplishing much; yes, catch thy breath and correct thyself, and failing here, prosper out there; speed and fever are never greatness; but reliance and serenity and waiting.

America is formless, has no terrible and no beautiful condensation.

44 Emerson, The Heart of Emerson's Journals, p. 223.
The nineteenth century literary aristocracy in New England stressed the making of "gentlemen" of letters, not professional writers. Scholars of this age frequently pursued other occupations or duties, the writing of and thinking about history remaining mainly creative avocations. Under the influence of Unitarianism, it was the Boston gentleman's public responsibility to promote the development of the literary arts in America and, interestingly enough, New England ministers, or men originally trained for the ministry, took the lead in the attempt to establish a native American literary tradition. Perhaps it was the Puritan way of thinking, in which theology was always preserved as a historical science to be based on verifiable evidence, which was most responsible for the interest in the American past evidenced in much inquiry among the Transcendentalists. In any case, the patriotic cry for literature of a peculiarly American quality seemed to echo loudest in Unitarian New England where historical records of the early American experience were well preserved and where scholars were prepared to match the efforts of European countries in which "scientific" methods of study were rapidly becoming stylish.

The New Engander's sentimentality about his past may have arisen not so much out of his jealousy of high grade European scholarship as it did from his romantic disposition to revive the thoughts, idioms, and vitalities in men of former days. Striving to acquire a "feeling" for history as it lived and breathed, to recreate leaders with color in their cheeks and passion in their stomachs, historiography required substantial artistic and literary skill, plus an indescribable creative enthusiasm for human emotions which the externalist "philosophical" historians, the Humes, Gibbons, and Voltaires of an earlier day, seemed to lack. This new
romantic variety of historical writing would be unique, elegant, and useful; entertaining for the general reader as well as informative for the scholar. Always a vigorous narrative in place of a dull chronicle of facts, romantic history featured heroic characters acting to manifest a grand theme, such as the dramatic triumph of human liberty over the reactionary obstacles of despotism. Indeed, the historian would assume the role of the painter of portraits, an illustrator of the national spirit struggling in the midst of crises or suffering at the brink of despair.

Transporting the reader to a past which was alive and active was more to the New England scholar than merely presenting the factual investigation of actual sources in an artistic manner, more than just the colorful relating of good stories from the past. It was the written portrayal of history in the form of moral drama, didactic in purpose and style, aiming through the use of analogy and metaphor to stimulate the mind and will of the reader to act in accordance with the ideals of the past. An effort to communicate the meaning of American experience, the dramatic form gave punch to the historian's choice of subject matter and provided cogency for his moralistic exhortations. Just as the romantic historian felt himself obliged to re-experience the past personally, he was no less impelled to convey the illusion of participation to his readership, affecting public values in the process. The history of the American Revolution thus became a preeminent tool for transmitting a sense of American character and purpose in the nineteenth century.

No one can deny that George Bancroft's monumental ten-volume History of the United States was the dominating example of nineteenth century American historical scholarship. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1800 and
educated at Harvard and at the University of Gottingen, Bancroft was one of those early nineteenth century notables trained for the ministry but who elected another occupation. He served as a preparatory school teacher until moving to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he began a profound career as a historian, completing the first volume of the *History* in 1834. Few if any American scholars better represented the scholar-public servant paradigm than Bancroft, a prominent figure in Democratic party circles throughout Massachusetts and unsuccessful carrier of his party's banner for the governorship of his state in 1844. This candidacy launched him toward a brilliant career as Secretary of the Navy under President Polk, as United States Minister to Great Britain, 1846-1849, and as United States Minister to Germany, 1867-1874.

Bancroft never concealed his democratic prejudice in writing which gave rise to the famous shibboleth about his work: "every volume voted for Jackson." In fact, the prominent German scholar Leopold von Ranke, whom Bancroft ironically admired for his well known devotion to objectivity in historical style, once praised the *History* as "the best from the democratic point of view." To Bancroft, American history was the epic saga of nature's progressive march toward independence, the manifestation of a grand Providential plan which gave meaning to disparate events and connected them to the whole. Human liberty became the incontrovertible moral theme of the work and, depending on the Transcendentalist's inscrutable "right reason" as an effective guide to interpretation, the author was to be the ultimate judge of American character, aloof, certain, and secure. With a solid spiritual conviction that progressive people were gifted with natural intellect, instinct, and vigor, Bancroft insisted on the power of
energetic principle to overcome injustice, self-indulgence, and lethargy. At last, the past provided universal meaning and contained eternal laws of virtue which were secluded in the depths of every free man's consciousness, to be drawn out triumphantly in periods of stress and disillusionment. The historian was the curator of these precious national forces.

To the New England romantics, as to John Adams, the Revolution arose mostly from intellectual dispositions, given sure direction by organic laws. "The American revolution grew out of the soul of the people," wrote Bancroft, "and was an inevitable result of a living affection for freedom, which set in motion harmonious effort as certainly as the beating of the heart sends warmth and color through the system." Here is the demonstration of the use of natural analogy, suggesting the almost deterministic control of Providence in human affairs. Yet the rational instincts of man played no less a part. "The rustic heroes of that hour," the author continued, "obeyed the simplest, the highest, and the surest instincts, of which the seminal principle existed in all their countrymen. From necessity they were impelled toward independence and self-direction." Finally he concluded that the revolutionary beginnings "revealed the plastic will which was to attract the elements of a nation to a centre, and by an innate force to shape its constitution." Thus the interaction of necessity and free-will, a partnership of divine intent and human desire,

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
set America on its independent course and provided the legal injunctions on which the new nation was founded.

Bancroft's assessment of the revolutionary ideology was remarkably modern, just as it was similar to the remarks of the patriots themselves. Of the colonies and the revolt, he observed that

Britain was the mighty mother who bred men capable of laying the foundation of so noble an empire, and she alone could have trained them up. She had excelled all the world as the founder of colonies. The condition which entitled them to independence was now fulfilled. Their vigorous vitality refused conformity to foreign laws and external rule.

The seeds of revolution were planted in Americans and required time and maturity for their fruition; yet the author regarded the oppressive measures of England under George III the accelerator for the movement toward separation. The inevitability of self-government was nonetheless the dominant theme in Bancroft's appraisal of the Revolution. In his words, the colonies "could take no other way to perfection than by the unconstrained development of that which was within them. They were not only able to govern themselves, they alone were able to do so; subordination visibly repressed their energies." Only by self-direction, Bancroft thought, could the colonies employ their collective and individual faculties to the fullest extent.

As if by the order of Providence, the Revolution sprang progressively out of the essential genius of the American people. National character

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48 Ibid., 4: 4.
was the result of the unfolding of a magnificent moral drama in which

The people of the continent obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature and without the appearance of effort bursts into life. The movement was quickened, even when it was most resisted; and its fiercest adversaries worked with the most effect for its fulfilment. Standing in manifold relations with the governments, the culture, and the experience of the past, the Americans seized as their peculiar inheritance the traditions of liberty. Beyond any other nation, they had made trial of the possible forms of popular representation, and respected individual conscience and thought. The numbers, purity, culture, industry, and daring of its inhabitants proclaimed the existence of a people rich in creative energy, and ripe for institutions of their own. 51

Liberty was thus the unifying motif in Bancroft's style, representing what he thought was the actual basis of continuity in the American spirit and in national institutions. This truth, he thought, possessed an objective harmony of its own.

Since the Revolution was progressive and democratic in principle, those Americans who did not support it were not offered the Bancroftian stamp of approval. The loyalists were described in devious, cowardly, and anti-democratic images. Thomas Hutchinson, Massachusetts' forlorn royal servant who objected to the Stamp Act through "proper channels" by preparing a well-reasoned, precise statement of complaints to the British government, but whose system of political patronage incurred the condemnation of various Massachusetts citizens, including both John and Samuel Adams and James Otis, is characterized with livid disfavor by Bancroft:

A nervous timidity, which was a part of his nature, had been increased by age as well as by the riots on account of the stamp act, and at times made him false to his employers. While he cringed to the minister, he trembled before the people. At Boston, he professed zeal for the interests and liberties of the province; had at one time courted its favor by denying the right of parliament to tax

51 Ibid., 4: 3.
America either internally or externally; and had argued with conclusive ability against the expedience and the equity of such a measure. He now redoubled his attempts to deceive; wrote patriotic letters which he never sent, but read to those about him as evidence of his good-will; and professed even to have braved hostility in England for his attachment to colonial liberties while he secretly gave in his adhesion to the absoluteness of metropolitan authority, and suggested a system of coercive measures, which England gradually and reluctantly adopted.\[^{52}\]

All that was admired in patriotism was found lacking in the loyalists, and this was the prevailing political viewpoint in New England long after the end of the revolutionary struggle. This attitude was particularly well displayed in an oration delivered by Bancroft as part of a July fourth celebration in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1836. In this speech, which was a superlative specimen of his Jacksonian manner of political thinking, Bancroft outlined the fundamental distinctions, as he saw them, between tories, whigs, and democrats. "To the tory, law is an expression of absolute will," insisted Bancroft, "to the whig, it is the protection of privilege; to democracy, it is a declaration of right."\[^{53}\] Then turning to the question of the nature of executive power, he pursued the pattern of the revolutionary ideology: "In the tory system, the executive and sovereign are one; in the whig system, the executive is the sovereign, except where expressly limited; in the system of democracy, the executive is not the sovereign, but the servant of the people."\[^{54}\] Here is subtle evidence that Jacksonianism had roots in Jeffersonianism and in the philosophy of the revolutionary era and, in Bancroft's view, democracy had

\[^{52}\text{Ibid., 3: 357-58.}\]


\[^{54}\text{Ibid.}\]
even inherited the progressive aura of the Revolution: "The tory clings to past abuses; the whig idolizes present possessions; democracy is the party of progress and reform."55

The History of the United States, a mammoth exhibition of the Jacksonian interpretation of the American past, was swamped with panegyric praise. Washington Irving wrote to Bancroft in 1852 that "your work rises as it progresses, gaining in unity of subject and in moral grandeur as it approaches the great national theme....You are securing for yourself what Milton looked forward to achieve by lofty aspirations--'an immortality of fame.'"56 From Bancroft's close friend and fellow historian, Francis Parkman, writing in 1882 after all ten volumes were completed: "It is a work which the boldest man would hardly hope to finish or dare at the outset to contemplate in all its extent."57 From Theodore Parker in 1854, the following evaluation came: "I know not which most to admire: the mighty diligence which collects all the facts and words--even the minutest particles of characteristic matter--or the subtle art which frames them in so nice a mosaic picture of the progress of the People and the Race."58 And finally, Ralph Waldo Emerson contributed his opinion in 1858: "The history is richer...than I dared believe; and--what surprised and charmed me--it starts tears, and almost makes them overflow on many and many a page.... It is noble matter, and I am heartily glad to have it nobly treated."59

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 2: 105-06.
57 Ibid., 2: 292.
58 Ibid., 2: 107.
59 Ibid.
While the adulation for the work was wide and profuse, it did not escape criticism, nor did it deserve to do so. English writer Thomas Carlyle, no doubt one of the most striking figures in an age of European literary brilliance, celebrated along with others the artistic strengths of Bancroft's style, but added a criticism which must have seemed rather piercing to the author:

in a word, you were too didactic, went too much into the origins of things generally known, into the praise of things only partially praisable, only slightly important...here is a man [speaking of Bancroft] who has an eye...he ought to fling down his spectacles and look with that!--Forgive my plainness of speech; did I think less of you than I do, I had omitted this shady side of the business, and left only the light...

Here the Englishman hit upon Bancroft's greatest weakness—that he was always unable to separate himself enough from his subject to see it in its full complexity. His sense of spiritual righteousness further intensified this fundamental flaw. His insight into the Revolution was limited because he was himself too much like the revolutionaries, his thinking so similar to their ideas that to praise them was to compliment himself. There was no perceiving the faults of the Revolution and the ideology thereof without seeing the narrowness of his own judgment. This Bancroft never seemed able to accomplish.

Other men of substantial notoriety in early nineteenth century New England found admirable intellectual qualities in the American Revolution, many of which they thought were particularly applicable to problems of their own times. William Ellery Channing, theologian and prominent leader in the Unitarian movement, found the American struggle infinitely preferable

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60 Ibid., 1: 225-26.
to that of the French in the following decade. Believing the American revolt successful because of its direction under the auspices of private and public virtue, he wrote in his Remarks on the Life and Character of Napoleon Bonaparte that "liberty did not come to us by accident, nor was it the gift of a few leaders; but its seeds were sown plentifully in the minds of the people."61 Here again is the ring of the democratic interpretation which Bancroft popularized. According to Channing, independence "was rooted in the conscience and reason of the nation. It was the growth of deliberate convictions and generous principles liberally diffused."62 The reverence for moderation thus persisted in American thought, a clear sign of superiority over the emotional excesses of the French Revolution. "We had no Paris," exclaimed Channing, "no metropolis, which a few leaders swayed, and which sent forth its influences, like 'a mighty heart,' through dependent and subservient provinces."63 The American Revolution was distinctive because "the country was all heart. The living principle pervaded the community, and every village added strength to the solemn purpose of being free."64

Edward Everett who, like Channing and Bancroft, was educated at Harvard, and who later gained fame as an orator, statesman, educator, and unsuccessful vice-presidential candidate with the Constitutional Union party in 1860, frequently lectured around the country on the public virtues of

62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Washington and the pressing need to safeguard the Union from sectional split. He too abhorred the unstable nature of European politics:

When we follow the train of events in Europe, from the year 1789 to the present day, we are ready to think that the task of reconstituting a State on liberal principles, I might say on any principles, is the most arduous and hopeless which can be undertaken by man. We there behold a great and enlightened people, among the most refined of modern States, boasting among her sons a large number of the leading minds of the age, engaged for two generations in the work of reforming the government, subverting this year the constitution of the last, passing from monarchy to republicanism, from the wildest anarchy to the sternest military despotism, scourged and betrayed by each new dictator, tribune, and demagogue, and plunging, with fatal recklessness, from experiment to experiment of bloodshed and ruin.66

The American Revolution, on the other hand, was exemplary because of its "long and silent preparation and the gradual approach; the soundness of the principles which impelled the movement, acknowledged as it was by the most illustrious statesmen of the mother country; the purity and pristine simplicity of manners that characterized the revolutionary leaders."66 Also Everett cited the almost total absence of those violent and sanguinary incidents that usually mark the progress of civil war; and the gradual development, out of the chaos of the struggle, of well balanced systems of republican government and federal union....67

Admiring the "solitary dignity" of the American revolt, he concluded by praising the national republic as a singular case of unified government not constructed upon the "calamitous ruins of earlier organizations."68

67Ibid., 3: 298.
68Ibid.
Thus it was the conservative simplicity and general orderliness of reform which most intrigued both Channing and Everett. The heroes of the Revolution were, in essence, abstractions of "the people" rather than self-serving demagogues, dictators, and scoundrels. As Bancroft's interpretation demonstrates, those who opposed independence were considered subversive for their timidity, for their ill-considered caution and indecision in a time of intense crisis. Modest, self-denying, and straightforward, the Revolution had all the qualities of an ideal person. Its individualism was tempered with moral responsibility, its violence with the grandeur of lofty principles. Extremism was rebuked by self-control and practical good sense, while powerful will and unconquerable resolution directed an entire nation away from despair. Endurance, self-reliance, and courage were the natural virtues which preserved the revolutionary effort and the bold new republic.

The progressive principle in history was no idle dogma, but a theme which had profound impact in nineteenth century thought and society. The effort begun by the Revolution, the intellectual crusade for human liberty and equality, keynoted in the Declaration of Independence, would never be permitted to rest in the young United States. Playing a dramatic part in this continuing struggle, the New England life style, along with New England philosophy, assumed crucial political and moral meanings in the young nation, even if it meant resumption of hostilities, section against section, in the form of civil war. What Emerson wrote in 1844 may well have general application: "the historian of the world will see that it was the principle of liberty; that it settled America, and destroyed feudalism, and made peace
and keeps peace; that it will abolish slavery."69

Countless scholars have analyzed the use of eighteenth century universalist ideas by the patriots against Great Britain. As the cornerstone of American revolutionary ideology, this universalism was rooted in the Enlightenment and maintained that men had been created naturally free and equal, the usurpation of this original condition being a violation of laws both natural and divine. Jefferson's personal motto, "rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God," became one of the clearest expressions of the revolutionary disposition in early America. But it is ironic that while ardent patriots attacked English despotism using an egalitarian philosophy, they had only begun to note the essential contradiction between the ideology they had adopted and black slavery in the colonies.

Historian Winthrop Jordan observes in White Over Black that the revolutionary period forced a sense of self-evaluation and introspection among leading white Americans. Quakers, for example, including John Woolman, had started to question seriously the tacit assumptions on which slavery was based, fundamentally suggesting that the best way to ameliorate the plight of black servitude and to reform slaves would be simply to free them, letting them partake the benefits of the freedom and equality of man's natural state. In fact, during the Revolution some Northern states adopted emancipation measures. Before the war was over, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a gradual emancipation act featuring a high toned preamble composed by Thomas Paine, amplifying his bold proclamation in

Common Sense that "man has no property in man." In addition, a number of slaves earned freedom as a result of military participation on behalf of the patriot side.  

Having taken considerable pride in their revolutionary ideology, anti-slavery Americans became acutely aware that the continuance of slavery presented a serious blotch on the national image projected overseas. Theodore Parker exhibited the indignant quality of New England abolitionism when he wrote to Reverend S. J. May in the early 1850s that

We call our Government a Democracy, and profess to found it on the essential and unalienable rights of human nature, which are equal in all men at birth. We declare that the only function of Government is to preserve these natural, essential, unalienable, and equal rights for each and all the persons under its jurisdiction. We go on to specify some of these rights, and mention the right to life, the right to liberty, the right to the pursuit of happiness, as things of the uttermost importance for the Government to preserve and secure to each person in the country, until he has alienated the right by some positive action which has in a formal and solemn manner been by the people declared unlawful. What just indignation is felt all over America when a tyrant of Europe deprives his subjects, or any one of them, of their rights!...But yet, in defiance of our first principles of government, so often affirmed, so perpetually boasted, the nation deprives one-seventh part of its population of the dearest of all natural rights. Despotic Tuscany and Austria have never a slave,...Republican America has three millions and three hundred thousand!

No less poignant was the ostensible threat of the peculiar institution to the core of American society. In a sense, slavery was perceived as a plague which could pollute horribly the missionary intent of American principles. It was the opinion of James Russell Lowell in 1859 that "slavery

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is the Achilles-heel of our polity; that it is a temporary and false... supremacy at last, because an enslaved people always prove themselves of more enduring fibre than their enslavers, as not suffering from the social vices sure to be engendered by oppression in the governing class." 72 This fear for the future of American principles, combined with the growing sense of moral outrage which permeated New England in the early nineteenth century, seemed to assure the eventual elimination of slavery in the United States. But the demand for abolition became more and more urgent as the years passed, and it was the revolutionary ideology which was invoked by anti-slavery people in the North against the evils of human bondage.

Following on this particular theme, historian Staughton Lynd in his Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism elaborates on the Charles Beard thesis that the Civil War was, in effect and in ideology, a "second American Revolution." Lynd asserts that "Americans have made two revolutions, in 1776-1783 and in 1861-1865. They were 'bourgeois' revolutions: the first preserved inherited property as it destroyed inherited government, the second enhanced property in factories and railroads as it abolished property in man." 73 The right of revolution, he notes, was justified frequently in writings during the entire century from 1760 to 1860 and in sources ranging from the Address of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in 1844, to Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address in 1861. 74 Thus the right to alter or abolish unjust government

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74 Ibid., p. 4.
in the United States became a preeminent expression of political and social conscience among Americans of nationalist sensibilities, this being particularly true of Northern abolitionists.

Charles Sumner, United States Senator from Massachusetts, reaffirmed on various occasions the original promises of the Declaration of Independence. Speaking on foreign relations at the Cooper Institute in New York on September 10, 1863, Sumner enunciated the fundamental difference, as he saw it, between the Revolution and the Civil War, that "the colonies were battling to found a new power on the cornerstone of Liberty, Equality, and Happiness to All Men, while our Slavemongers are battling to found a new power on the cornerstone of Slavery."75 Here again a New Englander condemns the unconscionable contradiction between American principles and the South's peculiar institution. Indeed, Sumner saw the difference between early patriotism and slavery of his own day as a matter of clear contrast, "so that whatever was once said in favor of American independence now tells with unmistakable force against this newfangled pretension."76

Upon witnessing the end of fraternal bloodshed and following the assassination of President Lincoln, the emotional Massachusetts Senator thought he saw in retrospect the meaning of the national experience and the proper course to take in rebuilding the Union. In comparing the two major American wars, the summarized in June, 1865, that

The first was for National Independence; the second was to make the Republic one and indivisible, on the indestructible foundation

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75Charles Sumner, His Complete Works, 20 vols. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900), 10: 24-25.

76Ibid.
of Liberty and Equality. The first cut the connection with the mother country, and opened the way to the duties and advantages of Popular Government; the second will have failed, unless it consummates all the original promises of the Declaration our fathers took upon their lips when they became a Nation. In the relation of cause and effect the first was natural precursor and herald of the second.

Sumner would later adhere to these beliefs in his support of radical reconstruction of the Union.

Without doubt, the nationalist impulse in the nineteenth century was to rid the republic of slavery while preserving the Union and the principles of government on which it was based. Equally clear is the importance of the revolutionary ideology to abolitionists. A progressive people with a dynamic political and moral philosophy, most Americans, particularly Northeastern Americans, seemed firmly convinced of their mission in the world, of their responsibility to make their noble experiment survive. By 1865, despite sectional tribulations and the carnage of civil war, that nationalist aspiration remained intact.

When Alexis de Tocqueville, the youthful and brilliant French social critic, traveled through the United States in the early 1830s, he thought he had encountered a republic where democracy was not a pedestrian political philosophy, but an active way of life which extended throughout American society, holding a powerful influence over American thinking. Equality, he thought, was the guiding principle of the new western nation. In the words of Tocqueville, "the more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that the equality of conditions is the

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fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived, and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated." Such was the theoretical image America projected to foreign eyes. But the reality under the mantle of glowing democratic propositions reveals an immature republic, struggling for recognition and approval in an established world, and battling desperately for a domestic realization of the ideals which had been inherited from the founding fathers. The early United States was, above all, an insecure nation, plagued by a host of baffling ironies and paradoxes which seemed continually to defy relief.

The second generation of American national leaders was forced to confront the psychological dilemma of the simultaneous existence of a sense of inescapable missionary responsibility and the inner distress of recognizing the hypocrisy of that particular outlook. Whereas the Revolution left a crucial prescription of unity of national purpose, the major sectional conflicts remained unresolved. In the North, the fusion of the revolutionary ideology with the injunctions of emotional Protestantism produced an explosion of abolitionist sentiment which could not be compromised short of the absolute destruction of slavery, at whatever cost to the Union. In the South, ironically enough, prominent aspects of the same revolutionary ideology, important concepts of individualism and the doctrine of states' rights, were enjoined to justify a separation from the Union in defense of a unique way of life.

Historian William R. Taylor, in *Cavalier and Yankee*, characterizes the early nineteenth century as an unmistakable period of anxiety among Americans,

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both Northerners and Southerners, over national identity and national purpose. Shaken by the problems of an unstable marriage of North and South, political and literary leaders began casting longing glances at their proud past, hoping to find in the virtues of the founding fathers the strength to make the anguished Union last. As Taylor puts it,

Over and over, speakers stressed the fact that the situation was one which called for individual initiative rather than external coercion in the form of legislation or the manipulation of institutions. In the face of such an indefinite but continuing crisis, individuals were warned that they must find within themselves the sense of dedication and the strength of purpose to see the country through. 79

Perhaps what America needed most, they thought, was another generation of Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Adamses; a collection of leaders who could set aside sectional troubles and unite the nation once again in the spirit of magnanimity and self-control. Indeed, Emerson's thoughts were revealing when he wrote in 1852:

The head of Washington hangs in my dining-room for a few days past, and I cannot keep my eyes off of it. It has a certain Appalachian strength, as if it were truly the first-fruits of America, and expressed the Country. The heavy, leaden eyes turn on you, as the eyes of an ox in pasture. And the mouth has gravity and depth of quiet, as if this MAN had absorbed all the serenity of America, and left none for his restless, rickety, hysterical countrymen. 80

But in any case, even if heroes could remedy the vexatious problems of North and South, such a new crop of leaders was simply not at hand. Emerson was again representative when he noted sadly that "Washington wanted a fit public. Aristides, Phocion, Regulus, Hampden had worthy observers. But there is yet a dearth of American genius." 81 Legislators

80 Ibid., p. 79.
81 Ibid., p. 85.
repeatedly stalled to prevent sectional clash, compromise after compromise being urged by the leading statesmen of the age--Webster, Clay, Calhoun, Douglas, and others. But the effort appeared hopeless as even the best men of the time seemed powerless to prevent the crumbling of the Union and the resulting civil war.

Perhaps this great crisis of the republic was just the painful part of growing up as a nation, the point at which it is realized, almost suddenly, that life is never so simple as it seemed in youth. The greatest shortcoming of the Revolution was the failure to complete an onslaught against the concept of human property. Yet, even if circumstances temporarily forbade the abolition of slavery in 1776, there is no denying that the subsequent hammering of the egalitarian idea on the American consciousness happily forced the eradication of slavery from American life, and that the revolutionary ideology was refreshed in the process.
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